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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the process of designing and administering a structured survey on dropping out of school to demonstrate the means by which working with organizations and their clients impacts research methodology. A dropout accounting system had been developed for the Ysleta Independent School District, a district with an enrollment of 50,000 students in El Paso (Texas). The researcher who had developed the system subsequently worked with a coalition of youth agencies--the El Paso Youth Network--to develop a dropout survey. Four design considerations arose: these involved identifying who would actually administer the questionnaire; means of developing clear and standard instructions; maintenance of client confidentiality and privacy; and logistical concerns including length of administration. A two-phased field testing process is length of administration. A two-phased field testing process is described. Numerous problems arose during the development of questionnaire items. Working with the youth agencies provided ready access to a population often difficult to access. Nevertheless, certain sacrifices in the research methodology resulted from tapping into extant social service schedules, policies, and personnel. (TJH)

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PARTNERS IN RESEARCH: METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS OF SCHOOLS COLLABORATING WITH SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES ON A DROPOUT SURVEY

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Abstract: When a coalition of social service agencies volunteered to collaborate with a research project on a dropout survey, the intricate process of instrument design and refine began in an effort to stay faithful to the radical pedagogical theory, informing much of the questionnaire, while accommodating logistical, personnel, and policy concerns of the participating organizations.

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PARTNERS IN RESEARCH: METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS OF SCHOOLS COLLABORATING WITH SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES ON A DROPOUT SURVEY

Conducting survey research through a network of community organizations, each with its own restrictions, is a complex process of coordination in and of itself. When the purpose of the research is traditional in method but innovative in content, however, the design of a questionnaire becomes a very difficult and lengthy process. This paper seeks to trace the process of designing and administering a structured survey about dropping out of school to show how working with organizations and their clients impacts the entire research method.

PURPOSE

In brief, the researcher--who had designed and implemented a dropout accounting system in the Ysleta Independent School District (YISD) (50,000 students) in El Paso, Texas--was frustrated by what she felt was a lack of good theoretical explanation behind the phenomenon of dropping out. The state's definition of "at-risk" overidentified students and focused on symptoms such as excessive absences and underachievement rather than on the causes of such behaviors.

Further, the dropout literature lacked regional specificity as to the causes for school leaving. Trained as a sociologist and aware of the significance of the border to many problems including educational ones, the researcher welcomed Gastright's admonitions about trying to rectify local problems based on "stereotypical views of at-risk students" (1989:1).

El Paso directly abuts Mexico--the only locus in the world where a developing nation shares a border with a developed nation. Interpenetration of both cultures into the two nations is the natural outcome of neighborhoods' being separated by no more than thin wires in

many places. Long the site of majority "minority" population, El Paso is also comprised of a population with lower educational backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses than the rest of the state. As recently as 1987, the average income was below $10,000.

Recent research on dropping out among Mexican-American students indicates that this minority group does not fare particularly well in American public schools (Velez, 1989). In part, early school leaving may reflect recent immigration patterns where parents have received very little education in Mexico.

Further, because of the geographical proximity of Mexico, El Paso is often the first stop as immigrants make their way to other, more prosperous parts of the United States. This fact and the influence of a major military base make the city fluid. A recent El Paso Times article (December 7, 1989) described the city as a kind of lopsided barbell with a tiny upper class, a huge lower class, and almost no middle class. It goes without saying that such factors impact students in schools and their proclivity for staying in for graduation or dropping out.

Several other motives prompted the desire to conduct research on causes of premature school leaving. School personnel who tracked the highly mobile students in and out of the district's schools were troubled and curious about what appeared to be the increased numbers of school leavers, despite vigorous efforts to retain them. The researcher likewise doubted the accuracy of media figures on dropping out--a doubt shared by many engaged in such research (Barber and McClellan, 1987:264; Fine, 1986).

Finally, when she had last taught as a ninth grade teacher at district school beset with problems, the researcher had seen some of her very brightest male students drop out. At-risk programs dwelling on skills' remediation would not recapture these intelligent boys whose alienation stemmed in no small part from such education in the first place. Nor were most of her female students pregnant when they left school (see also Baca et al, 1989:2). Her primary goal was, then, to examine school-related reasons for dropping out.

RATIONALE FOR A STRUCTURED SURVEY

Before the opportunity arose to work with social services agencies (see discussion in Methodological Implications of Collaborating with the Youth Network), the researcher had anticipated conducting a phone questionnaire with trained interviewers. Because the population would be dropouts, many of whom might have reading or language problems, she decided against any survey type requiring respondents read and fill in answers. This benefit would then offset the some of the drawbacks of phone research such as lack of telephones among the population (Frey, 1983:19).

When she designed the first instrument, she opted for a structured interview with only a few open-ended items. Time and reliability considerations made confining the choices seem preferable.

Limiting response options has both desirable and undesirable effects. Uniformity of answers and ease of analysis are tremendously benefitted by close-ended items (Baca et al, 1989; Babbie, 1979:149), though of course, the loss of depth of information as well as directing responses are both severe drawbacks.

Theoretical considerations also affected the choice of item-type (see discussion in Theoretical Implications for Research Design). Coding open-ended items would necessarily introduce structure, however, and conceptual bias could equally exist at this end of the project. Because of the impossibility of drawing a systematic random sample of dropouts, the researcher wanted to compensate with as large a sample as possible. Considerations of time and cost weighed heavily, as a result.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Since the proposed investigation would try to probe the reasons behind dropping out--especially those associated with school, the researcher turned toward a body of theory that seemed to best explain the structural and structural-cum-personal reasons for dropping out. Because of her training as a sociologist, she found highly personal reasons insufficient to explain national and regional dropout trends. That is, while reasons might be perceived as personal, trends in behavior clearly indicate social causes.

Critical pedagogical theory--as informed by the work of Pablo Freire, Henry A. Giroux, Stanley Aronowitz, Michelle Fine, and others--make some trenchant observations about structural causes of pupil alienation. These theorists also make connections between the social structure and individual actions of students who resist but often in ways counterproductive to their liberation as social actors.

The contradictions between the ideology of education's providing fulfillment of the American dream for all students on the one hand, and the reality of what education could actually deliver on the other,

received a rather deterministic airing with Schooling in Capitalist America (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). This work theorized a

> straightforward correspondence principle: For the past century, at least, schooling has contributed to the reproduction of the social relations of production largely through the correspondence between school and class structure (130).

Not only would schools teach subject content; more to the point, they would covertly "teach" the social relations of the larger society--relations that depended on a hierarchical division of labor, alienated labor, fragmentation of work, and competition enforced through "ostensibly meritocratic ranking and evaluation" (131). Students from those social classes who owned the tools of production were those who could be expected to do well in school and to reap the most benefits of education. Any exceptions to this "reproduction" would be so miniscule in number as to not change the shape of social class structure.

Although this piece of research did not specifically address non-structural issues such as dropping out, its economic determinism implied that students might well withdraw early having "learned" their place in the social structure through formal curriculum and informal instructional strategies and practices. Their lack of control over curriculum content (Shor, 1980; Shor, 1987; Shor and Freire, 1987) or their performing required fragmented tasks and/or engaging in competitive practices that undermined their achievements could alienate even those dedicated to upward mobility through education. Fine (1987:161) addressed the silencing of student-generated topics and concerns as an alienating condition of classroom experience for the working class pupil. Such students would be far more likely to leave school prematurely than those whose better life chances would be

assured through the correspondence principle--that is, those for whom the payoffs to education would be more of a "sure thing."

Though Bowles and Gintis referred to the work of Paulo Freire only once in their seminal book, when the reaction to their correspondence theory came in the following decade or so with the radical pedagogical theorists, the Brazilian's "critical consciousness" became the keystone of what education ought to be. Denying the direct correspondence Bowles and Gintis found, these educational sociologists rejected the notion of students as passive receivers of overt and covert instruction. Instead, they elaborated on the organization of education and classroom practices that prepared students for an unequal society and that hampered their ability to think and act critically (Kapferer, 1986:5). They also delved into the contradictions arising out of the various "charges" to the institution of education (see also Holmes, 1985).

Freire (1986, 1973) himself had developed a method for teaching adult illiterates in Third World countries--not young public school students in developed countries. He also emphasized the active agency of students **constrained but not determined** by unequal relations of power encountered in school (Giroux's Introduction in Freire, 1985). Educators began to see, in the Brazilian's critique of traditional education as an institution preserving oppression, however, an apt critique of public education throughout the world.(1)

A related strand of theory came from the resistance theorists who also debated Bowles's and Gintis's determinism. In the resistance perspective

> schools represent contested terrains marked not only by structural and ideological contradictions but also by collectively informed student resistance. In other words, schools are social sites characterized by overt and hidden curricula, tracking, dominant and subordinant [sic] cultures, and competing class ideologies. Of course, conflict and resistance take place within asymmetrical relations of power which always favor the dominant classes, but the essential point is that there are complex and creative fields of resistance through which class- race- and gender-mediated practices often refuse, reject, and dismiss the central messages of the schools (Giroux, 1983a:260).

Dropping out of school might then be understood as one expression of alienation and resistance--one with dire consequences for students. The resistance theorists point to how the lack of critical consciousness often results in acts that resist but that do not liberate the resistor and in fact may harm him/her (Giroux, 1983a, 1983b, 1988a, 1988b; Fine, n.d. and Fine, 1986).

Fine reasons that since many economic and social factors, as well as structural features of schools, contribute to dropping out--a mass experience, by her definition--it makes sense to look at structural and social explanations beyond personal ones. Her rationale for supporting the structural position is that the "most compelling" explanations for why students drop out comes when one considers "what would happen, in our present-day economy, to these young men and women if they all graduated" (1986:407). Her tacit point is that the job market in its present configuration cannot absorb all the labor should 100% of all students graduate. Shor's perspective is that college is a warehouse where surplus labor is stored and regimented (1980:6).

Even an admitted structural-functionalist like Holmes has asserted that the "functional imperative" of secondary education concerns the custodial (schools as "benign asylums") and distributive functions of schools (1985:27). That is, schools must keep students out of the job

market and allocate them, though competitive evaluation, to places in the class structure through jobs. These are the imperatives; there are other educational functions that are more negotiable. If this assessment is correct, it is not surprising that students become alienated and drop out, especially when their "allocation" does not look promising. Needless to say, dropping out has become the supreme act of allocating oneself to the lower class, but staying in school does not determine allocation to a more advantaged position.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH DESIGN

The challenge arising from this theoretical posture for an investigation of why students drop out was, then, to design an interview adequately covering students' perceptions of structural causes--a difficult task. Students have generally bought into psychologistic notions of themselves as actors. They tend to explain their behaviors merely in terms of idiosyncratic causes. As Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) note, students absorb "un-freedom" into their psyches (103) through learning and experiences that to them appear natural, immutable. They often do not consciously perceive certain practices and acts as domination, though they well may unconsciously so perceive them and rebel individually.

Open-ended survey items can allow students to give answers from their perspectives, fraught though they may be with pscyhologizing or idiosyncratic explanations, and at first glance this approach seems superior to the structured interview. Nonetheless, the purpose of the latter organization is to guide respondents toward looking at more structural causes behind premature school leaving, that is, setting the

same "frame of reference" for all respondents (Converse and Presser, 1986:33).

Although there is a danger of imposing theory in this process of guiding, that same danger exists when researchers aggregate or map open-ended responses in the analysis phase--replication and partitioning decisions (McGrath, 1982:82). Such decisions are as vulnerable to researcher bias, though often not acknowledged as such (Ibid.:101). The superiority of writing structural observations into the instrument itself is that this method at least introduces students to thinking about themselves as social--not merely personal--actors.

Clues as to some structural reasons for early school leaving are contained with demographic questions such as parental education and occupation. Velez has listed six categories of causes for school leaving: 1) confrontation (related to discipline problems), 2) accelerated role taking (social maturational problems), 3) school factors, 4) background (home and family characteristics), 5) socio-psychological factors (aspirations of family and student), and 6) migrant status (1989: 120). Each has elements of structural reasons for dropping out, though some are again symptomatic rather than causal. That is, behavior and several school factors are manifestations rather than causes of school problems.

Fieldtesting also suggested that after having left school, students came to perceive dropping out primarily as a personal failure, even when problems extraneous to personal reasons were consciously recognized. The researcher then redesigned the survey instructions and some items in an attempt to get behind this perception by encouraging reflection on certain items. For example, at the end of the instrument

she added a long checklist of reasons, garnered from a variety of dropout questionnaires, to provides checks against responses given earlier in the survey. The interviewer could thus check for contradictions.

Likewise, while it was important to know if before leaving school a student had had discipline problems, from the standpoint of critical theory it was even more salient to learn the dropout's perceptions of why those problems had arisen. But because of the aforementioned tendency to self-blame, the researcher added questions meant to get at respondents' assessment of the fairness of school practices or reasons for resistant acts.

Contingency questions and placement of items within a nest of questions about discipline seemed more likely to elicit reflection and honesty over normative responses, where respondents answer as they think they ought (Babbie, 1979:322). Such nesting and placing allowed "room" for the student to give highly personal or more structural reasons and would provide, especially during the analysis phase, more accurate information as to the deeper meanings of yes/no answers (Converse and Presser, 1986:43).

For example, the "script" for prompting changes in the types of questions being asked was written into the survey itself: "We're going to change direction a little now; many dropouts have had some discipline problems when they were still in school" helped students follow changes in the trajectory of questions. It also focused on the commonality of discipline problems among dropouts, thereby alleviating possible embarrassment. The diction also implied structural causes of

discipline problems: students "have had" these problems--not, students have behaved badly.

This question was followed by three others, but only the first, "Did you have discipline problems when you were in school?" was asked of everyone. Contingency items were about when students had had the greatest problems (close-ended and impersonal) and why they thought they had had the problems (open-ended and soliciting reflective answers).

"Why" questions tended to be very difficult for most students in the fieldtesting to answer, yet they were precisely the ones that tapped information suggested in the resistance theory literature. "Which rules in school bothered you the most and why" had the potential to reveal, if respondents were able to answer, perceptions about authority relations. Instructions for interviewers urged slowing down and taking time at this point in survey administration and included actual prompts to elicit thoughtfulness (Converse and Presser, 1986:44).

In fact, fieldtesting revealed that "why" questions were extremely difficult for respondents, who appeared either to be unused to examining their motives or to reporting them.(2) Part of the training for interviewers, then, was to give extra but minimal prompts to urge respondents to think about their answers. Here, additions to the interviewer's instructions became the way to make students conscious of their reasoning. The method contributed to making students more critically conscious in Freire's sense.

Finally, because some resistance theory has been very good at pointing out that students may be conscious of their rebelliousness,

even if politically naive of ways to rectify the sources of their antagonism, two sorts of items were added. The first asked respondents to state whether they would characterize themselves as defiant when they left school and the reasons for an affirmative answer. Later, near the end of the instrument, the researcher added a checklist of "esteem" items. Besides including a statement about having a reputation for being defiant (3), this list covered many other sources of self-esteem that would show that students resisting authority might, in fact, have well-developed, secure personalities (Fine, n,.d.).

Trying to tap critical theory, then, posed a variety of research design problems, some of which were anticipated merely through familiarity with the theory and others which became most evident during phase one fieldtesting. Among these design problems were which survey type to use, and once that was decided, how to get respondents to look behind the psychological reasons they were most familiar with giving. Mixing item types and including instructions for administering the survey in its body then became other ways of helping to get at students' perceptions of structural causes of dropping out.

METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF COLLABORATING WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

The researcher was able to tap a pool of dropouts from of a local coalition of youth agencies, the El Paso Youth Network (EPYN). The Youth Network formed independently of the research project at about the time the researcher had begun revising a structured questionnaire tapping critical theory's explanation of why students leave school prematurely. Asked to serve as the school district representative to the EPYN, she mentioned her interest at the first meeting she attended.

Response was overwhelming. Many organizations wanted to learn the reasons increased numbers of students seemed to be leaving school. The research also served as a catalyst for one committee's work for the Network. The fortuitous convergence of a research project conceptually well underway and the birth of an organization that could facilitate data collection created an opportunity that in fact shaped the subsequent form of the survey itself, affected the substance of the various items, and structured the research process to a large degree (Kulka, 1982:47).

Using EPYN agencies for respondents created convenient access to ex-students in GED, in juvenile probation, in job training, and in teen parent programs--thereby assuring a fairly good sample of interviewees quickly and relatively inexpensively. It also had the potential for providing much needed assistance in actual administration through the use of volunteer staffs at the various agencies. But as McGrath (1982) has cautioned, though it is desirable to maximize generalizability of populations, precision in measurement and control of variables, and existential realism, "the very choices and operations by which one can seek to maximize any one of these will reduce the other two" (74). Using the EPYN would result in many compromises.

Working through the Network brought up four design considerations. First was to determine who would actually administer the questionnaire. If agency personnel were to assist, then how much grounding in theory would they need in order to get the kinds of answers the researcher hoped to elicit? Second, how could instructions be made most clear, standardized, and easy to understand so as to assure the integrity of the research itself? Third, was the make-up of questionnaire items

such that no violations to client confidentiality and privacy would occur? Finally, were the length of administration or other logistical concerns such that the questionnaire would present few if any problems to the social service agency's delivery of services?

It was decided through The Greater El Paso SER's (SER) immediate cooperation that fieldtesting would begin with the then-current version of the questionnaire. The researcher delivered the survey, by now an eight-page instrument, that was to be administered by an agency worker after training by the researcher. Because the instrument had originally been planned as a telephone survey, the dialogue was already written on each form, thus providing much of the standardization necessary to research integrity. The training for administering the survey had also been planned for telephone workers. As soon as several EPYN organizations expressed a desire to participate in the research, this training was condensed into a four-page set of instructions meant to reinforce training. Nevertheless, the second fieldtesting began without any training except as provided by this condensation and within-instrument scripts.

A discussion of this turn of events follows, because it is the sort of consideration that can arise when one cooperates with other agencies. Briefly, SER's representative to the EPYN was a well-educated man who was extremely interested in learning the reasons why students dropped out. Although he himself did not tutor such students, he was in close contact with those who did. He was at a stage of his work, which was to secure monies and projects for SER, where he had a slight amount of time to devote to fieldtesting.

When the researcher's schedule proved less flexible for immediate launch of the research, he contacted her by phone, asked many questions, and began to pull students from GED classes so that he could interview them. As a result, he was actually more knowledgeable than the researcher about the logistics of administering the instrument under the conditions of a working social service agency. Phase one fieldtesting, which the researcher had done herself, had been carried out with familiars in a summer job program in the Ysleta Research Office.

The SER representative then made frequent calls, asking the reasons for some questions, explaining difficulties with certain items, and complaining about the length of the survey, which took approximately thirty minutes to administer.(4)

Several revisions of the instrument and one of the instructions resulted from these interactions. The final version, a nine-page instrument, came only after the researcher herself administered the instrument to five SER clients.

Though the precipitous start to the research project was certainly not ideal scientifically, it nevertheless combined research purposes with exigencies that would continue to occur throughout cooperation with social service agencies. The SER representative also had a familiarity with clients at the agency that allowed him to sense when questions appeared unnecessarily probing or when they could be worded in ways more attuned to the experiences of these students.

On the other hand, he was relatively immune such considerations as the inaccuracy of students' self-blame statements. For example, if students assumed all blame for school leaving, this official generally

accepted it as one of life's hard lessons. When answers on the final checklist of reasons for dropping out at the end of the survey contradicted some earlier answers, he became more aware of how well clients had learned SER's rhetoric intended to goad them toward achievement.

The following considerations were ironed out in this phase. First, it became clear that for staffs administering the survey to stress certain kinds of information-gathering accurately, it was necessary to provide a minimal understanding of why superficial answers would be insufficient. That is, they perhaps did not need grounding in radical pedagogical theory, but they needed to be aware that students' initial answers were not necessarily insightful enough.

Ideally, the researcher would have preferred to use a small cadre of interviewers who were well grounded in the theoretical approach. Nonetheless, beyond the purely practical considerations of having sufficient numbers of staff to interview large numbers of dropouts, there would have been the consideration of responses' being affected by the use of strangers--language, demeanor, ways of perceiving based on class, ethnicity, gender, etc. (Converse and Presser, 1986:50). In short, practical considerations won the day, and the researcher tried to mitigate, using the technique below, the lack of theoretical knowledge for interviewers.

"Some researchers think that those dropping out of school are a lot smarter than we have often thought--that we may be losing some of our brightest students, even though they may not be doing well in school" was the kind of message we decided on to encourage staffs to probe beyond initial answers. Staffs were exceptionally ready to hear

this kind of message, since it supported their experiences in working with dropouts. The statement revealed an important aspect of radical pedagogical thought--that students do not fail because of lack of aptitude--but was not complex. Staffs then learned that such researchers were looking at many kinds of reasons why students might leave school: the purpose of the research at hand was to confirm or deny information from other research for El Paso youth.

It was also clear that we had to alert staffs to inconsistent answers in case follow-up or re-questioning was necessary (Babbie, 1979:341). This was handled in the instructions by explaining which items were correctives to which others or by giving "probes" that would not determine the response. The extent to which staffs with little training would follow these directions was impossible to control, however.

Phase two fieldtesting also allowed us to refine the presentation of scripts within the body of the questionnaire. Scripts were boldfaced and placed within quotes, so that all interviewers would say the same thing to respondents. Although staffs were told they were to read these statements, it is clear that all did not do so. Often, if a staff member sat beside a respondent in such a way that the latter could read the survey as they went along, the interviewer did not necessarily read the statements.

Several items were reworded to avoid assumptions about behaviors. For instance, questions about drug and alcohol use were made to focus on **amount** of use once the yes/no contingency were established. Instructions at the beginning of the survey also told respondents they were free to not respond to any items they so chose. Only first names

were used, and disclaimers about the interview's being related to any part of the agency's program were stated overtly. That is, students were reassured that there answers would not be made a part of their participation in the program. Questions about how stressful home life felt at the time a student left school did not probe the source of stress.

As it turned out, however, while the questionnaire itself probably preserved privacy, the farming out of questionnaires to social service agency staffs evidently threatened Department of Labor officials, who refused to let Job Corps participate. This was a major setback for the research project, as El Paso has an extremely successful Job Corps Center. The researcher, as well as EPYN participants, were very eager to answers for the some 400 youth at the Center.

Finally, as phase two fieldtesting moved to actual administration, logistical concerns involving clients and schedules came into play--restraints that often alter the research process at the practical level but which are rarely the topic of methodology texts (Kulka, 1982:43). The length of the instrument was one such concern. Some agencies could only sporadically administer the survey, since their contact with clients was so scheduled. On the other hand, others saw clients daily on a long-term basis and were able to continuously draw from a pool of ex-students. Streamlining the questionnaire while attempting to preserve its reflective nature on some of the pedagogical items was a constant dilemma in finalizing its form.

Working with these agencies, then, provided ready access to a population often difficult to find. It also extended the size of sample beyond that which would have occurred using telephone lists two

to five years old. Nevertheless, certain sacrifices resulted from tapping into extant social service schedules and personnel. Although the researcher recognized that obtaining a large sample would not necessarily provide generalizability, the advantage of access to respondents would compensate for other problems that arose. Such considerations are exactly the kind likely to be encountered in cooperative efforts between governmental bodies such as schools and social service agencies.

FOOTNOTES

(1) See Richard Shaull's Foreword in Freire, 1970.

(2) Students may not answer "why" questions because they are also afraid of being honest about potentially "dangerous" issues--issues that do not get talked about in school (Fine, 1987: 158; Shor and Freire, 1987:24). From teaching experiences I have had, however, I know that students from very poor, uneducated, and authoritarian households were unpracticed at giving reasons for their behaviors.

(3) The item was "What are some things you felt confident about [when you were in school]?" Among the fourteen esteem items was "I had a reputation for being daring."

(4) Phase one fieldtesting had shown about a 20 minute administration time, but in large measure, that time resulted from working with familiars--dropouts already accustomed to the speech and personality of the researcher. Declared pretesting--that is, where the respondents knew they were helping the researcher fine tune the instrument--also took place before the survey was ever administered in phase two fieldtesting. (See Converse and Presser, 1986: 52 for a discussion of participating and undeclared pretesting.)

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